

CHARLESTOWN

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When emergency strikes, they'll be ready to roll

By James O'Brien, Globe Correspondent | December 14, 2008

Boston may love that dirty water, but should city residents facing some future emergency switch their tune to "Gimme Shelter," volunteers from Charlestown are ready to do just that.

The city's first Community Emergency Response Team, announced by Mayor Thomas Menino in September, emerged Wednesday as a band of average Bostonians who have been trained to shelter and care for their neighbors during a crisis.

Some of the volunteers are mothers and sons from a neighborhood church. Some are seniors and city officials who have rolled up their sleeves to help. But all 19 of the Charlestown residents are now in position to perform extraordinary actions in anything but average conditions.

Under fluorescent lights at the Charlestown Community Center, they donned bright pink vests, unfolded a gymnasium-wide spread of cots, and set up check-in tables for an imaginary disaster-struck populace during last week's exercise.

The volunteers had trained for nine weeks with instructors representing a spectrum of agencies, including the Red Cross and Boston's Police and Fire departments.

To get to know their new surroundings Wednesday night, volunteers toured the building. At times, its labyrinth of late-1970s design proved bewildering.

Beth Burton, cluster administrator for Charlestown's community centers, stopped occasionally to explain the layout of the facility's angled hallways and tucked-back doors that sometimes led into the same rooms the group had just left.

Volunteer Julianne Hickey suggested signs differentiating the nearly identical cement-block passageways.

"We could have one hallway named Main Street, one hallway named Bunker Hill Street. How's that for an idea?"

Upstairs on the basketball court, the cots multiplied.

Volunteer Deb D'Ambrosio remarked that her son was "definitely on the A-team," after he proved particularly adept at setting up the 30-pound military cots.

The team is also trained to dispense drinking water and food in large quantities. They can do that inside the shelter, or they can set up walk-up and drive-through centers.

In addition to administering first aid, they have been coached in how to provide emotional support to frightened and displaced people.

Now that Charlestown's team is underway, city officials plan to tweak the program and then roll it out to six other Boston neighborhoods over the next 12 months.

"Everything can't be top down," said Menino of the resident-volunteer teams. "Community involvement, that's what I'm after. Building up from the neighborhood level."

Neighborhood level involvement has taken root in places like New York City, where there are already 63 of the emergency response teams in place. Last March, some of the city's teams helped in the wake of a Manhattan crane collapse.

The current model of neighborhood-based response teams was first used in Southern California in 1987 to help residents stranded by impassable roads after the Whittier Narrows earthquake. The Federal Emergency Management Agency took that template nationwide.

Since Sept. 11, 2001 - but even more pointedly since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 - Boston officials have seen the need for local emergency teams, said Donald E. McGough, director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Preparedness.

"We learned and took on a new course, post-Katrina, in terms of taking all hazards into consideration," McGough said.

Patricia Simpson, who is the emergency preparedness community outreach coordinator at Mass. General's Charlestown HealthCare Center, is organizer for Boston's first team, which received approximately \$5,000 in federal grants.

For Simpson, the project has personal significance too.

"I grew up in the Bronx, and was on the phone with my mom as the second plane hit the tower" on Sept. 11, 2001, Simpson said. Her best friend died in the attacks that day.

Committed to this kind of activism, Simpson went to New Orleans twice after Hurricane Katrina to help with recovery.

"There were no people at the community level taking the helm," she said. "It got worse and more confused because of that. The community level is the level at which things are going to happen, or not happen."

At the end of the exercise Wednesday, the volunteers gathered in the rows of cots, and talked about ways to refine future training. The shelter set-up tasks, it turned out, were more complicated than anticipated.

McGough said he saw the city's recruits coming together as a cohesive unit.

"Our top two objectives here are team-building and also building confidence," McGough said. With the exercise completed, "they have experience setting up the shelter and they know what to expect."

As the rollout begins, McGough said, members of the Charlestown team would help recruit and teach new members.

And that's a key to sustaining the effort, said Herman Schaffer, director of community outreach at the New York City Office of Emergency Management. Based on New York growing from 10 to 63 teams since 2003, Schaffer said Boston's program would thrive only if it used its new team during downtime.

"Find some way to keep them engaged," Schaffer said. "We suggest to any large city to get them out into the community. They won't stick around if they're not doing anything." ■